Südasien-Chronik - South Asia Chronicle 9/2019, S. 309-327 © Südasien-Seminar der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin ISBN: 978-3-86004-343-1

Trans-Himalayan Discourses: Tracing Landscapes, Colonialism, Modernity and Reconfigured Livelihood in the Mountains

NOKMEDEMLA LEMTUR
NOKMEDEMLA.LEMTUR@UNI-GOETTINGEN.DE

KEYWORDS: HIMALAYAS, BORDERLANDS, LANDSCAPE, LIVELIHOODS, COLONIALISM

Reviewed works

Dan Smyer Yu & Jean Michaud, eds. 2017. *Trans-Himalayan borderlands: livelihoods, territorialities, modernities*. *Asian borderands.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 310 pp., ISBN: 978-94-6298-192-8, US$115.00.

Townsend Middleton & Sara Shneiderman, eds. 2018. *Darjeeling reconsidered: histories, politics, and environments.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 312 pp., ISBN: 978-0199483556, $50.00.

Chetan Singh. 2018. *Himalayan histories: economy, polity, religious traditions*. Ranikhet (India): Permanent Black in association with Ashoka University, 303 pp., ISBN: 9788178245300, Rs. 895.00.

Nachiket Chanchani. 2019. *Mountain temples and temple mountains: architecture, religion, and nature in the Central Himalayas*. University of Washington Press, 288 pp., ISBN: 978-0295744513, $70.00.

Introduction

In 1992, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, mountains became a special focus of discussion. The "Mountain Chapter" of the conference recognised them as sensitive ecosystems in need of conservation. Jon Mathieu (2011) highlights this event as a moment of recognising the close relation between human activity and mountain ecology. His work points towards a deeper engagement with modes of expression and models that place these highlands as the centre of the investigation. The push to study the relationship between human activity and mountain ecology has produced a series of compelling works from different disciplines. It is within this context that new works in the fields of humanities and social sciences have looked at the Himalayas. They explore a wide range of human activities, including nomadic lifestyle, migratory labour patterns, and urban settlements.

In the West, the 2500-kilometre-long Himalayan range is bounded by the Indus River and the peak of the Nanga Parbat. The Namcha Barwa peak and the Brahmaputra River bound it at its Eastern limits. South to North, the Himalaya proper measures from 240 to 320 kilometres in width. It lies within the modern nation states of Bhutan, China, India, Nepal and Pakistan (Isserman & Weaver 2008). The sheer vastness of the mountain range presents a challenge to scholars attempting to study this region. As Schneidermann (2016) suggests such a task requires work in multiple languages and across several state boundaries. The Himalayas contain complex networks through which diverse ethnic communities exchange goods and knowledge.

Four recent works on the Himalayas provide a refreshing approach to studying the region. All of them stress the need for an inter-disciplinary approach. Some of them look at ethnic communities' encounter with colonialism and modernity. Others discuss how mountain spaces enable their inhabitants to negotiate with various powers that attempt to bring their activities under their control. Two books are edited volumes that bring together scholars from different disciplines; their themes and some of their authors overlap. The other two are monographs with a specific focus on the Himalayan region. The common thread in all the four works is the emphasis on the persistence of the trans-Himalayan connections; they are all interested in the ways in which the mountain shapes the relationship between different groups of people and the processes within their society and culture.

The foundation of Dan Smyer Yü and Jean Michaud's edited volume *Trans-Himalayan borderlands: livelihoods, territorialities, modernities* (2017) draws from the works of Willem van Schendel (2002) and James Scott (2009). Moreover, it builds on Jean Michaud's (2010) formulation of *Zomia* as non-state spaces to make the case for *trans-Himalayas* as 'a space of multiple state margins between which connectivity and disconnectivity concurrently take place' (Yü & Michaud 2017: 11). The contributions to the volume discuss various aspects of borderland and frontier issues, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. It is particularly compelling to read how communities reconfigure their livelihoods in the face of modernity and how cross border networks continue to operate despite states' attempts to regulate and control such trans-regional mobility. Trans-Himalayas in this volume comprise the Central Himalaya (including their North East Indian, Upland Bangladesh, Nepali, and Bhutan peripheries), Mainland Southeast Asia, Southwest China, and Northwest China including the Tibetan Plateau (Yü & Michaud 2017: 17). In covering such a wide region and the differently demarcated massifs, it is an ambitious project to connect this expanse to 'complex historical, ethnographic, and critical examinations of the local and transregional effects of state-building, economic globalization, religious networks, and modern geopolitics of territoriality' (Yü & Michaud 2017: 27).

Townsend Middleton and Sara Shneiderman's edited volume *Darjeeling reconsidered: histories, politics, environments* (2018) poses the question of how perspectives from the contemporary social sciences and humanities open up renewed understanding of Darjeeling's past, present and future. In contrast to the geographical expanse of *Trans-Himalayan borderland*, it focuses on the settlement of Darjeeling in the Eastern Himalayas. Studies on hill stations often stress their colonial trajectory, and their connection to the British Empire. Works like Dane Kennedy's *The magic mountains* (1996) provide a historical perspective on British romanticist encounters with the mountains. The British imagination favoured the mountains due to their cooler climate. They provided a "sanitary" space away from the "heat and illness" of the plains and promised to create some distance from the British officials' public lives in the plains. A 'history of exceptionality', the volume argues, marked Darjeeling, and made it a place apart from other hill settlements.

The volume begins with the construction of Darjeeling through the colonial intervention and continues the narrative into the contemporary period. Through ethnographic case studies, it attempts to show how

the various facets of politics, social movements, and the relationship between environment and labour have been premised on the colonial experience of exceptionality in the mountains. Darjeeling's 'exceptionality' was the product of a collusion between planter capital and colonial governance which prevented the regulation of labour. This made Darjeeling an extremely attractive site for intermediaries who recruited different ethnic communities from the surrounding regions for employment in the region's enterprises. Darjeeling is also presented as a unique site. Firstly, even though it is a part of West Bengal, it is culturally and intellectually distinct from it. Secondly, as a gateway to the North-Eastern states of India through the Siliguri corridor, Darjeeling hangs in a delicate balance of being regarded as a subject of either borderland or Tibetan studies.

In *Himalayan histories* (2018), Chetan Singh argues against historiographical tendencies that articulate national aspiration and thereby uphold the nation-state as a sole unit of analysis. Through highlighting the paucity of records in regard to the mountains, he brings up the question of whether the mountain economy and society are inherently incompatible with methodical record keeping due to its agro-pastoral communities and their trans-humane practices (Singh 2018: 9). Focusing on the Western Himalayas (Himachal Pradesh, India), Singh makes the case for specific local histories. With regard to this particular region of the Himalayas, Ramachandra Guha's *The unquiet woods* (1989) has pioneered the scholarly debate on the ecological aspects of the colonial intervention in the mountains. He brings to focus the specific mountainous region of the United Provinces of India. The rich forests and meadows enabled colonial forestry to evolve in this region, which subsequently led to social and environmental dislocations, and a rise of communities' conflict with the State. Guha provides an illuminating picture of early protest movements in defence of customary forest rights. While noting the importance of factors like railway expansion, the World Wars, deforestation, and the *raja-praja* relationship in the protest movements, Guha romanticises the social structure of the region and does not discuss the various tensions within this mountain society. Such kind of history focuses mainly on the effects of the colonial intervention on the environment.

In contrast, Singh provides an overarching narrative of the region's development from the pre-colonial period onwards. Its location at the periphery of colonial rule provided greater freedom, compared to the closely regulated core areas. 'Region' in this case becomes a manifestation of not only the physical geography but of the dynamic

relationships in an area and the social processes and ideologies that give it meaning (Knight 1982, cit. in Singh 2018: 3). Singh investigates the relation between the region's polity, religion, and socio-economic networks. Such a history, he hopes, can inform the understanding of abstract socio-economic processes in the larger historical developments. Singh uses the available sources in his attempt 'to create a historical understanding on a range of subjects pertaining to material and cultural life in the western Himalayas' (Singh 2018: 11).

The fourth book, *Mountain temples and temple mountains: architecture, religion, and nature in the Central Himalayas* (2019) by Nanchiket Chanchani posits a refreshing attempt to understand the origin of the sacred landscape in the Central Himalayas (Uttarakhand, India). For him, the temples and the temple architecture act as an archive which informs his understanding of the development of a sacred terrain—a focus of pilgrimage—in the Himalayas (Chanchani 2019: 6). Chanchani identifies the gradual encroachment of temples in the fringes of the foothills of the Himalayas and traces their slow but gradual progression into the higher regions. He thus reveals the complex ways in which kingdoms from the North and South of India attempted to bridge the gap between their kingdoms and the 'sacred' Himalayas from the third to the twelfth century CE.

These four works present new directions of research on the rich histories, cultures, polities, and religious practices of the Himalayas. These volumes maintain the unity in its geographical reach but highlight the uniqueness of different localities and their historical trajectory, and attest to what seems like a myriad of possibilities the Himalayas offer for research and interrogation of the post-colonial world. In the following sections of the essay, I analyse the four major themes that emerge from these works and show how different disciplines interact on similar themes.

Sacred and secular geographies: acts of territorialisation

Cultures often have landscape myths that allow people to relate to the environment surrounding them. Not all traditions embrace nature and landscape in the same way. Even so, Simon Schama outlines two characteristics of landscape myths and memory that are almost universal: firstly, their endurance through the centuries and, secondly, their power to shape the institutions we live in (Schama 1996). Nachiket Chanchani's *Mountain temples and temple mountains* offers

the opportunity to discuss the Himalayas—which literally translates "the abode of gods"—by focusing on temples in a specific region.

The seminal work of Alex MacKay demonstrated the sacredness of the Kailas-Mansoarover complex to be a result of colonial intervention (MacKay 2016). Chanchani's investigation of the Central Himalayas (now the present state of Uttarakhand in India) as *dev bhumi (*land of the gods) builds on this finding (Chanchani 2019). MacKay's critical historical analysis of Kailas shows that there existed a network of both distinct and overlapping sacred geographies across the Himalayas before the British arrived in India. However, Chanchani is unique in his approach as he attempts to historically trace the development of a sacred terrain, which later became the focus of pilgrimage. He examines a conglomeration of stone temples and steles littered across the Central Himalayan landscape. He writes, 'the careful documenting and interpreting of stone temples and the sculptures enshrined therein can thus give us a means of investigating the construction of sacrality' (Chanchani 2019: 18). Using the corpus of such lithic remnants as an archive he traces the slow expansion of North-Indian kingdoms into the Himalayas. He shows how the realm of the Guptas from the fifth century CE expanded not through violent invasion, but through process of claiming the land by erecting temples and statues.

While one might consider old Indic texts like the *Vedas*, the Epics and the *Puranas* which point to millennium-old sacred geographies. Chanchani, however, hints at the ambivalence of the representation of the Himalayas in these texts. MacKay points out that any mention of mountains in the old Indic texts were metaphors for strength and purity and did not refer to the actual physical mountains. '[S]acred geographies,' he writes, 'are not required even to be internally cohesive, for they were never intended to function as maps' (MacKay 2016: 81). Through a detailed study of the various statues and architecture in comparison with specific traditions in the mainland such as the Dravida and Nagara styles of architecture, Chanchani is able to trace stylistic links with various traditions in the North Indian and South Indian kingdoms. The ripple effect of the socio-economic and political changes in the northern kingdoms were felt in the Himalayas through the change in material culture. The act of claiming a region through religious architecture in the Himalayas seemed to have been the preferred mode by rulers, as Singh further explains using the example of Keonthal and Kumharsain in his chapter *Nature, religion and politics.* He traces how the *thakurais* (petty chiefdoms) established indigenous religious traditions based on the physical environment of

the mountain. There existed popular cults that had deep roots to the mountains. The socio-political order was closely entwined with such cults and these contained the idea of a sacred geography, on which the newer indigenous religious tradition based itself on.

The growth and development of 'temple Hinduism' in the form of stone temple architecture and deities as gendered and juridical beings in the Central Himalayas is another aspect that established the relationship between the Gupta rulers and the Brahmins in the fifth and sixth centuries (Chanchani 2019: 51). In continuation of the relationship between religion and territorialisation, using oral histories and the primary sources that already exist, Singh traces the historical process of state formation. He begins by going back into the pre-colonial period with its local monarchies whose power was concentrated in small hamlets and valleys in the mountains. In the chapter "Defining community and geography, religion, and hegemony" Singh (2018) emphasises that the emergence of community and the configuration of territory occur simultaneously, and the presence of and traditional allegiance to a *deota* (local deity) solidifies the territory of a specific community. Any change in power, whose seat was located in the main river valleys, was often signified in the change of the deity and, as increasing brahmanical tendencies spread into the hill, the *thankurais* managed to set up a hierarchy of gods. This in turn translated into a hierarchisation of hill society itself. Religion was used as an instrument of control since the emerging monarchical powers could not maintain large standing armies to enforce allegiance of clans and communities in distant territories.

Religion was found useful to make a territorial claim on the mountain region. Particularly as Saivite rulers were able to appropriate local cults into their pantheon. Ensuring a continuity in the local beliefs and practices allowed them to exert their influence without having to use violence or repressive measures. Chanchani identifies the early sites of Lakhamandal and Palethis in the central Himalayas that were established as sacred but were still not pilgrimage sites. The place closest to become a pilgrimage site was the Jageswar Valley and the chapter "Saiva ascetics and kings on a flaming forest" investigates why this happened so. Chanchani explains that it was the unique characteristic of the geography of the site as a point where three rivers met and flowed in the north-north-east direction as compared to the south flowing rivers of the mountains. The dominant species of trees in this region was the *devdhara*, or god’s wood. It has been dated back to at least a thousand years by paleo-botanists. The architectural evidence

points to the renunciates of the Saivitic cult—Pashupatas—having claimed this region. Another significant factor supporting the Saivites was the decline of the Guptas in the seventh century. Smaller kingdoms and principalities emerged and attempted to distinguish themselves from their previous overlords who were Vaisnavites. Therefore, they claimed devotion to Siva and patronised Saivite cults and gurus. The attempt to claim the mountains was not restricted to the northern kingdoms as ambitious southern kingdoms also showed interest in bringing the Himalayan peaks and the source of the holy rivers into their domain.

The presence of an elaborate temple architecture begs the question of who built these structures. The renunciate sects were instrumental in creating and sustaining relations with householders of various castes who would often come to the renunciates to perform various ritual functions. Through these connections, artisans, masons and sculptors were hired from the plains. This can be attested through copper plate inscriptions and stone engravings which provide important insights into new patterns of patronage and ritual. Chanchani presents us with the idea of the temple as a *visual vernacular.* Borrowing from the idea of 'vernacular millennium' which is described as 'an age when the literary and political promotion of regional, sub-regional and local languages occurred across South Asia' (Chanchani 2019: 168). Hence, according to him temples function similar to vernacular languages, through its varied sub-regional architectural modes. Temples could be seen as a way of contracting the distance between the plains and mountains. Firstly, in the spiritual and political realm and secondly through the movement of different people involved in constructing these structures. Such movements have had a longer history as renunciates themselves were travelling across the mountains in search of minerals with which they could create transactional structures and often free themselves from the bonds of patronage (MacKay 2016: 112).

There are many layers of myth behind a particular landscape and as one goes further back into the past it exposes their particular vision of the landscape. Simon Schama (1996) draws heavily from art and literature, shifting from the classical and contemporary Indian/South Asian culture to provide a compelling account of the landscape myth in the Western tradition. Chanchani's use of temple architecture shows 'the simultaneous assemblage of soteriologies in the plains and dispersion of activities that embedded new meaning in the Himalayas' (Chanchani 2019: 174). World renouncers like the Pashupatas were integral to the reorganisation of the Central Himalayas through

maintaining relations with the householders, linking sacred sites to one another and ultimately creating overlapping grids. This made the Central Himalayas into a 'coherent cultural region' (Chanchani 2019: 175) and connected them to other sacred sites of the subcontinent.

Chanchani's historical account of sacrality juxtaposed with Georgina Drew's chapter in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands* offers interesting insights on how sacrality is negotiated with the technologies of modernity in the contemporary period. Through an ethnographic study on the Tehri Dam in the Garhwal Himalayas in Uttarkhand, Drew argues that to view hydroelectric projects as a symbol of modernity overlooks their effects on the personal, cultural and religious terrain. She argues that by paying attention to these and by uncovering the mutual embodiment of religion and landscape multiple 'trans-Himalayan modernities' are revealed. She interviews Hindu interlocutors and assesses their relationship with the holy river Ganga on which the dam was being built. She also looks at environmentalists' propositions for sustainable ecologies. This reveals the subjective implications of dam building and the competing desires for and against the wider project of development, modernity and modernisation.

While religion is the key element to trace the historicity of the sacred landscape, 'modernity' becomes a key term to understand socio-cultural norms and processes. This 'serve(s) as a worldwide reference point in the struggle regarding the proper world view' (Mathieu 2011: 120f.). In the Himalayan context, this struggle is between secularism and sacrality. In *Trans-Himalayan borderlands,* Dan Smyer Yü shows the secular function of Buddhism in politics. His chapter on trans-Himalayan Buddhist secularities draws our attention to the power of religion in the public sphere. Yü posits that Tibetan Buddhist secular engagement with public sphere is affecting the way Tibetans and Non-Tibetans project the future status of Tibet.

Tibet is lodged between two powerful states who have several border disputes; China claiming territorial sovereignty calling back to its Mongol and Manchu past, and India on British colonial cartography. Tibet manages to claim autonomy by carefully engaging the public sphere with Buddhist secularity. This, he argues, is the process of religious values being translated into a universally accessible language. Thus, religious beliefs and practices enter the public sphere cloaked in a secular language and practices. The political devaluation of the Dalai Lama can be seen as the separation of state and church. This is meant to strategically strengthen the Tibet cause with uninterrupted leader-

ship in the form of the Central Tibet Administration (CTA) which would help Tibet's chances of negotiation with China in the future.

One way of seeing the secularisation of the landscape is presented by Georgina Drew and Roshan P. Rai's contribution in *Darjeeling reconsidered.* They investigate how 'geographies of exclusion' are created in the mountain through the lens of water management. The oft heard plight of a water scarcity in Darjeeling leads the authors to discover the politics of water distribution that prioritised the settlement pattern of colonial era. As the central hub, the top of the hill was given priority and received most of the water supply. Lower down, the water literally trickled to the poorer residents. This recalls the work of scholars who persuasively argued that water is a conduit and symbol of power differentials (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 223). Through the micro example of a community's work in Darjeeling, the authors show how a relatively trivial conflict of water distribution between residential spaces in Darjeeling provides clues about power relation and role of space in social control. Perhaps this can serve as a clue for future research to bring to light other such conflicts to highlight the fact that such spaces are in fact contested. Attention to geographies of exclusion illuminates how unequal and identity-based conflicts are spread across spaces and places.

Sara Schneiderman's (2017) case study is based on her field work in the districts of Dokkha, Banke, and Mustang in Nepal. She investigates how Himalayan people conceptualise their territory in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands.* These districts were only in recent history integrated into modern Nepal and had divergent historical relationships with Tibet and the East India Company (EIC). They remained relatively autonomous. Through on-site interviews and the engagement with the relationship between terrain and language, she establishes two factors that imbibe territorial consciousness. These are 'administrative boundaries'—the state's structuring of villages and towns into administrative units as a process of national integration—and 'affective boundaries'—complex kinship and social relations, and human settlement patterns. The two factors are mediated by regionally specific historical experiences of state incorporation.

Tracing trans-Himalayan networks

In the introduction to their edited volume, *Trans-Himalayan borderlands: livelihoods, territorialities, modernities,* Dan Smyer Yü and Jean Michaud outline their goal of revising Himalayan Studies. Brian

Houghton Hodgson (1801-94), an officer of the English East India Company first established the field of Himalayan Studies in anthropology and Buddhology after his initial exploration of overland routes to China in the mid-nineteenth century. The newly reconfigured field of trans-Himalayan studies sees the Himalayas as an ecologically continuous region and emphasises the ethno-historical connectivity of what is now referred to as frontiers, borderland communities and trans-border livelihoods. These studies recognise the inherent convertibility of the cultures, empires, civilisations and modern states which inform the current geo-political cartographies and borderlands of the greater Himalayas (Yü & Michaud 2017: 16).

Most of the work in this volume takes off from the earlier works of Van Schendel (2002) and James Scott's (2009) idea of *zomia* as non-state spaces. Michaud's contribution in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands* presents a modern historical account of the ethnically diverse South East Asian Massif. He explains that this region was the refuge for people escaping the forces of invasion and feuds. It then underwent an agrarian transition, from a subsistence mode of living to industrial agriculture and cash crop production. This was a result of a rampant modernisation and the forced inclusion into the global economic order.

Chetan Singh also transposes the *zomian* principle in *Himalayan histories* as he attempts to write a history of what he calls the Western Himalayas, which is at present the state of Himachal Pradesh in India. He places this particular region as 'never drawing the vortex of mainstream political process in South Asia' and 'often the refuge of exiles and rebels' (Singh 2018: 27). Singh justifies writing specific local histories due to the richness of empirical sources available. Through this he hopes to provide meaningful explanations of the larger historical developments and abstract socio-economic processes (Singh 2018: 8).

Hildegard Diemberger's chapter on Buddhist books in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands* tells the story of materials and technologies that connect different ecological environments inhabited by very different groups of people. Through a deeper look into the production of Buddhist sacred texts in the form of books, it illuminates the heterogeneous web of relations in the Himalayas. It reveals the historic Kyirong route—which connected Tibet to Nepal following the Zarong Tsangpo/Trisuli River—on which the people and materials involved in the production of the books travelled. These books are significant on two levels: firstly, Tibetan books are connected to the

cult of relics as they embody the speech of the Buddha. Secondly, it reveals the socioeconomic context in which the books were produced; a thriving world of people and knowledge crossing across the breadth of the Himalayas. The colophon in the book gives us a peek into the lives of the illiterate and partially literate communities like the carvers and traders involved in obtaining the materials required for producing the books.

The theme of interconnectedness continues in Gunnel Cederlöf's chapter in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands* as it shifts focus to an oft neglected portion of the silk route—the south west silk route, connecting British territory in Bengal to the Yunnan province in China through Burma. The desire to secure an overland route to the Chinese Middle Empire had been a persistent aim of the EIC and thereby pushed the company to expand into the Eastern frontiers. This process was accompanied by efforts to map the region. This mapping initially started as one to identify a network of markets, of which some were never visited by the EIC officers but marked on hearsay. By 1838, this virtual map became solidified as a representation of official boundaries by Captain R. Boileau Pemberton. This map informed the viewer of the British interests as the EIC wanted to control the eastern frontier like a spider web—focusing on points where the spiral threads across the radials—strategic points in the communication networks. Cederlöf's historical account asserts the prevalence of premodern connectivity and the beginning of the modern cartographical division of the region which was laid down by the EIC.

Colonial past and legacies

The EIC's incursion into the subcontinent presented a significant break in the way various communities related to each other and their natural landscape. It often came in the form of complex sets of laws, or the codification of the respective rights of the state, tribal pastoralists and peasants. These laws aimed to curb the movement of various agro-pastoral communities and to fix them to a particular place. This can be seen through the restrictions placed on the Gaddi community in the Western Himalayas. Singh's (2018) chapters "Strategy of interdependdence and pastoralism" and "The making of colonial modernity in Kulu" show the state curbing access to forest areas through a series of Forest Acts. Seen as a source of commodity to generate revenue through timber extraction in the nineteenth century. By the next century the colonial state argued for protection against environmental

degradation. The strategy of categorising forests as 'wasteland' (which as was also applied to Darjeeling), empowered the state to edge out village communities from any form of ownership or control, and made the pastoralists direct 'tenants' of the government (Singh 2018: 204). What the State failed to recognise was the intricate relationship between the pastoralists and peasants. It was eventually such pastoralists like the Gaddi who had to skilfully negotiate between the increasing revenue demands of the state on the one hand and the expectations of the peasantry on the other (Singh 2018: 164).

The strategies of control in the Himalayas often expose the complexity of the mountains that forced the colonial state to adapt their methods as they realised their policies enacted in the plains could not be transposed on to this region. The borderlands became, according to Simpson, 'complex and fragmented entities' far from the image of stability and control that the colonial state projected (Simpson 2017). In the same vein, Townsend Middleton's chapter in *Darjeeling Reconsidered* highlights the making of a space of colonial exceptionality in Darjeeling. He states that Darjeeling went through a process of primitive accumulation under the colonial government with Dr. A. Campbell, Darjeeling's first Superintendent in 1839. Campbell singlehandedly converted massive tracts of land in Darjeeling marked as a 'wasteland' into private property. As mentioned earlier, it was the collusion between colonial governance and planter capital that managed to keep Darjeeling an exceptional space by preventing any kind of labour regulation in this region.

Simultaneously, Darjeeling was represented as a picturesque place for leisurely visits rather than one of belonging. This representation disregards the native inhabitants and the labourers who were first lured to Darjeeling, as Rune Bennike's chapter in *Darjeeling reconsidered* shows. In the colonial imagination, he states, Darjeeling was a place to be *consumed*. '[R]ather than constituting a place in its own right', he writes, 'Darjeeling [was] framed in terms of accessibility from the outside' (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 62). Darjeeling was always seen in relation to its accessibility from Calcutta and this gaze came to be produced in administrative practice as well. This, Bennike explains, was a distanced form of place production which was relational and classed. The British and the Bengali *bhadralok* saw it as a place of leisure, to take a break from work and escape the heat of the plains. The narrative overlooked the Nepali migrant population that produced this scenery. This migrant population, according to Jayeeta Sharma's chapter in the same volume, were posited as mere

auxiliaries of the Euro-American efforts, who saw the mountains as a potential symbol of human triumph over nature (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 76). Through a historical analysis of the migrant population, Sharma reveals a complex labour economy with diverse competing ethnicities and emphasises the 'potential of writings left behind by the many Euro-Americans passing through this settlement to interrogate the colonial archive for some hint of the labouring transcript that might allow her to find the otherwise elided, nameless subaltern actors' (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 80).

Building upon the historical context laid out by the chapters of Townsend, Bennike, and Sharma, the reader is brought to the contemporary dynamics of ethnicity, class and mobilisations that underlie the region's ongoing political transformation. The historical migrant populations are now the natives of modern Darjeeling. The second and third section of *Darjeeling reconsidered* entitled "Politics and social movements" and "Environments and labour" cover the issues of contemporary Darjeeling that are the symptoms of the colonial intrusion. The premise for these inter-personal and class struggles is based on the colonial state's refusal to recognise the immigrants in the nineteenth century as subjects of the British Empire. This placed the migrant population in the highlands in a precarious position as they had little legal protection. Efforts of the people to organise themselves and demand for native self-rule began as early as 1917 through the Hillmans Association.

Bethany Lacina studies the electoral demand for Gorkhaland in *Darjeeling reconsidered* through the political biography of three successive leaders—Deoprakash Rai, Subhash Ghisingh and Bimal Gurung. Her work shows how when incumbents are electorally secure, their incentive to pass autonomy demands dwindles (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 111). The demand for Gorkhaland is the centrepiece of politics in Darjeeling and everything seems to revolve around it. It speaks of the anxiety underlying the region's history of belonging to the nation. Having been disenfranchised by the British since the conception of Darjeeling, the anxiety endures as the hills continue to appear to their inhabitants as largely disaffected and distanced from the nation. Political parties and ethnic associations now capitalised on this very feeling as illustrated in the chapter by Nilamber Chettri. Several ethnic associations in Darjeeling emerged that have tried to voice people's separate identities and demands. All these associations were premised on the notion of difference.

The British initially came up with the homogenised category of the "hill men", which was eventually replaced by the Gorkha identity. Associations of the Tamang, Limbu, Khambu and Yakkha communities were developed to preserve culture and tradition, and to latch onto technologies of post-colonial governance, e.g., the scheduled tribe (ST) status. In order to be categorised as ST, certain associations indulge in 'performing tribalism', i.e., they claim a tribal past. Thereafter, such categorisation under Schedule VI of the Indian constitution provides for affirmative action in education and employment. Nevertheless, '[S]ubjectivity in Darjeeling', Chettri writes, 'is inextricably related to both issues of belonging and becoming. It is by transforming themselves into tribal subjects within a legal and political discourse that ethnic groups assert their rights and demand entitlements from the state' (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 172).

Modernity and livelihood

Nation building efforts in the trans-Himalayan context often results in the reconfiguration and reconstruction of livelihoods. In Darjeeling this is closely related to the ethnonational politics of the highlands and their efforts at climbing the socio-economic hierarchy. In Sarah Besky's contribution in *Darjeeling reconsidered*, she studies the politics of the Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre (DTMTC). The DTMTC's aim is to prepare Nepalese, who as a group were historically profiled for low level service jobs, for managerial jobs in the neighbouring tea gardens. Training becomes a political tool to indoctrinate the hopeful student into the Gorkhaland movement. It exposes the politics of Darjeeling and the generational gap of the people. The trainees view their training as apolitical and one that equips them for careers that enable mobility. This contradicts the ideas of the older-generation of the place-based movement for Gorkhaland that stress the value of territorial fixity in strengthening identity (Middleton & Shneiderman 2018: 201).

Continuing the studies on how different people in the Southeast Asian massif are confronted with modernity are the chapters by Yang Cheng and Brendan Galipeau in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands*. Yang Cheng studies China's infamous 'Ghost town', a farming village transformed overnight into an urban city of Chenggong in the new district of Kunming, with towering buildings built by China's construction economy. He shows how the villagers, in the face of modernisation, cope with their displacement. While the compensation for the

land allowed them access to new material goods that were seen as symbols of modernity, their meagre earnings through employment in menial jobs in Chenggong—where they were mistreated by its new residents—motivated these displaced farmers to regain social respectability by returning to farming. They do so by renting farmlands within commutable distance and growing mostly cash crops. Yang describes this as a 'floating niche' that allows them to straddle between their home and their new farming site. Similarly, as we see in Galipeau's contribution, in north western Yunnan the Tibetan Catholic community reinvent themselves in the face of modernisation by catering to the growing consumption of wine among the Chinese population. This community uses its catholic past as a marketing instrument to promote winemaking as a livelihood practice. They emphasise their historic and religious ties with Europe. This strategy recalls Demossier's idea of *terroir—'taste of place'*, a marketing strategy used by French wine makers as a marker of the geological and geographical uniqueness of their wines, which often led to the legal recognition of local wines and individual winemakers (cit. in Yü & Michaud 2017: 216). In both cases, this was part of a process of historical and cultural differentiation within a global economy.

This reconstruction of livelihood is the dominant theme and captured further in the chapters of Li Quanmin, Li Yunxia and Sarah Turner in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands*. The De'ang people in southwest Yunana are credited for being the first to discover the properties of tea drinking. Li investigates the ecological morality of the people and its role relative to the development of the social usage of things. Tea is very significant for its ritual purposes. The people of De'ang use tea in Buddhist offering rituals to yield merit for their lives and thus produces what Li calls a 'merit landscape' in their living space. This merit landscape—a concept drawing from works of Tim Ingold, Dan Smyer Yü and James Gibson—signifies a gift exchange process between the people and the Buddhist ritual masters. Merit is an important component of the Theravada Buddhism practiced by the De'ang people. It is connected to the principle of *karma*. The practice of offering tea in rituals is a visible and visualised expression of the merit landscape. This chapter reflects that despite the pressure to grow cash crops, tea offering and the merit landscape it creates sustains cultural memories and strengthens solidarity. It reveals the nexus of religion, culture, and traditional ecological knowledge.

The stories of the cultivation of rubber in Laos and of cardamom in the Sino-Vietnamese region, by Li Xunxia and Sarah Turner respect-

tively, show how regional communities respond to state pressures towards agrarian transformation, commodity markets and commercial intensification. Located in the border regions, communities who are often marginalised in their own countries use informal trans-border networks to escape state control over their production. This reveals the market networks and their increasing knowledge of government policies and regulations. Such communities devise new methods of engaging with state agents and bypass them using these informal networks instead of retreating deeper into the forest.

The Laotian government's drive for growing rubber instead of poppy comes from the drive to modernise the highland population and to halt their swidden (slash and burn) agriculture. The surge in demand for rubber due to the Chinese automobile industry's increased need for rubber incentivised the shift to commercialise the land resources and eradicate poppy cultivation, which was morally looked down on. In doing this the government hoped to reshape the nation's identity by bringing them into the global resource extraction and commodity production market. Li Xunxia's study shows how the Chinese and Lao Akhas (community of the region) consciously turn their trans-border network, historical border crossing and trade into an advantage for economic prosperity. Li draws from Fold and Hirsh's (2009) formulation of the frontier, which has become a popular trope for conceptualising the changing social and resource space incurred by the intrusion of capital (Yü & Michaud 2017: 245). Li Xunxia sees the frontier as a productive 'in-between' space. This space allows for the transition of new market relations as well as new social relations, all of which are interwoven (ibid.). The decision to grow rubber over other cash crops was an effective strategy, since growing sugar cane is physically taxing and growing opium is illegal. Rubber ensured better income even though it takes a longer time to generate profit (as the trees have to reach maturity before they are tapped). The long-term investment of time and resources allows people to lay claim to the land, maintain their livelihoods through farming and reach a more comfortable future (ibid.: 258).

Sarah Turner's chapter in *Trans-Himalayan borderlands* disputes the earlier notions of the frontier which tended to homogenise economic structure and social relations in the cycle of frontier development. This shows local frontier communities reacting to, reworking and resisting such homogeneity in nuanced ways (ibid.: 265). In her ethnographic study of the Hmong and Yao cultivators in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, she explains the transition to new livelihood options in the

form of growing cardamom. This is a response to the growing demand for cardamom by Chinese pharmaceutical companies. As a non-timber forest product, cardamom gives the Hmong and Yao people access to cash, allowing them to find balance between commercial opportunities and the preservation of their cultural traditions. The link to the Chinese buyers is maintained through 'historical trade routes across the border [which] are being strengthened by this cardamom trade, and long term networks are not being severed by a state created borderline' (ibid.: 250).

These case studies show that borderlands are often caught in the dilemma of what Jean Michaud calls 'modernise or perish'. However, the situation is not as bleak as it seems, because the various indigenous communities have agency and have managed to or are trying to reach the delicate balance of an 'indigenised modernity' (Turner, Bonnin & Michaud 2015). This is 'pivotal in people's livelihood reconstruction as both market and the state are entangled in the frontier area' (Yü & Michaud 2017: 246f.). The communities modernise according to the demands of the market but manage to creatively negotiate for and maintain their traditional values and way of life.

Studies on the Himalayas, like the mountains themselves, are often a challenge given the sheer vastness of the region and the diversity it encompasses. Each of the contributions in the volumes represent the Himalayas that the various scholars encountered. The mountain's emergence as a multi-state and multi-cultural space through various historic and economic connections only presents us the potential for further studies into the various entanglements of people and processes in the highlands. As researchers embrace the call for an investigation from different perspectives and on the basis of different primary sources which question the idea of "methodological nationalism", it has been proved that a different political economy undergirds the various social and cultural processes in the Himalayas.

Bibliography

Chanchani, N. 2019. *Mountain temples and temple mountains: architecture, religion, and nature in the Central Himalayas*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Guha, R. 1989. *The unquiet woods: ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalaya*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.

Isserman, M. & S. Weaver. 2008. *Fallen giants: a history of Himalayan mountaineering from the age of empire to the age of extremes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kennedy, D. 1996. *The magic mountains: hill stations and the British Raj*. Berkeley: University of California.

MacKay, A. 2016. *Kailas histories: renunciate traditions and the construction of Himalayan sacred geography*. Leiden: Brill's Tibetan Studies Library.

Mathieu, J. 2011. *The third dimension: a comparative history of mountains in the modern era*. Cambridge: The White Horse Press.

Middleton, T. & S. Shneiderman, eds. 2018. *Darjeeling reconsidered: histories, politics, environments*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Schama, S. 1996. *Landscape, and memory*. New York: Vintage Books.

Shneiderman, S. 2016. Afterword | charting Himalayan histories. *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, 35 (2), pp. 136-8.

Simpson, T. 2017. "Clean out of the map": knowing and doubting space at India's high imperial frontiers. *History of Science: An Annual Review of Literature, Research and Teaching*, 55 (1), pp. 3-36.

Singh, C. 2018. *Himalayan histories: economy, polity, religious traditions*. Ranikhet (India): Permanent Black in association with Ashoka University.

Yü, D. S. & J. Michaud, eds. 2017. *Trans-Himalayan borderlands: livelihoods, territorialities, modernities*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.